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Article

A Theological Phenomenology of Listening: God's 'Voice' and 'Silence' after Auschwitz

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Abstract: This paper develops a theological phenomenology of listening by exploring the following questions: First, what is the relation, in prayer, between speech and silence? Second, may we legitimately determine prayer as a 'dialogue' with God? Third, what does it mean to speak of God's 'silence' after Auschwitz—is God completely 'absent' or just 'hidden'? Fourth, how can we identify what God wants us to say and do, and how can we know whether a prayer has been answered? Texts by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim authors (from Rûmî via Luther, Kierkegaard, and Chrétien to Buber, Fackenheim, Levinas, and Derrida) provide the basis for the discussion.

Keywords: listening; God's 'absence' or 'hiddenness'; divine presence; prayer; dialogue; post-Holocaust theology

1. Introduction

This paper develops a theological phenomenology of listening by exploring the following four questions, which arise through the practice and concept of prayer: First, what is the relation, in prayer, between speech and silence? Second, may we legitimately determine prayer as a 'dialogue' with God (and if so, in what sense), or would it be more adequate to regard prayer as a specific form of attention to God? Since God's 'voice' is not acoustically audible, the answer is far from self-evident. Third, what does it mean to speak of God's 'silence' after Auschwitz—is God completely 'absent' or just 'hidden'? Fourth, how can we identify what God wants us to say and do, and how can we know whether a prayer has been answered?¹

These questions combine *phenomenological* issues that concern the human experience in the ways in which it is 'given' to or eludes consciousness; *theological* issues, including the critical reflection on the speech of, to, and about God; and, last but not least, *epistemological* issues regarding the grounds and limits of knowledge about a God who remains beyond reason.² Texts by Jewish, Christian,³ and Muslim authors provide the basis for the discussion.

God's 'silence', 'absence', or 'hiddenness' has been experienced in various historical situations since biblical times, for instance, in connection with the Babylonian exile. Yet the unimaginable immensity of the suffering connected to the industrialized homicide of 6 million Jews in the Shoah has provoked a new kind of literature that specializes in the question of how Jewish life with God

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the research seminar 'Phenomenology of Listening (no. 1): Theology' at the Center for the Study of Jewish Thought in Modern Culture, University of Copenhagen, on 20 October 2017. The text includes translated and revised versions of some passages in my Danish article 'At give stemme til det usynlige: Overvejelser over bønnens sprog' (Welz 2012a).

² As to the question of whether (and if so, in what ways) prayer is key to the knowledge of God's existence and divine attributes, see (Welz 2018a, pp. 443–66). As to the relation between theology and phenomenology, see (Welz 2008, pp. 4–24).

³ Regarding the New Testament roots of Christian prayer and its practice in the first four centuries, see Hvalvik and Sandnes (2014) Hvalvik and Sandnes

is still possible after Auschwitz. I do not discuss whether it is true that the Holocaust is a radically unique rupture in history because my focus lies elsewhere: on the question of whether one can still pray to a God who did not spare His elected people from mass murder. Not all Jews agree that God was indeed silent in the death camps and unreachable to human cries. Likewise, in a post-Holocaust situation, we have different options in regard to prayer. What I want to do is to portray these options by drawing on classical approaches that may apply both to everyday and extremely limited cases. I chose thinkers from widely different historical contexts and traditions in order to make sure that the discussion would not be one-sided, and that it takes antithetical possibilities of understanding God's 'voice' or 'silence' into account.

2. Prayer—Between Speech and Silence

In exploring the relation between speech and silence in prayer, and in assessing the possibilities and shortcomings of vocal prayer, I turn to Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jean-Louis Chrétien's considerations of reasons in support of the primacy of speech, and of the virtue of silent listening. I am writing from a Protestant point of view, but I include other confessional religious positions that in some points challenge and, in others, support Luther's view of prayer.⁴

2.1. Primacy of Speech

One of Luther's best friends was his barber, Peter Beskendorf, known throughout town as Peter the master barber. Luther appreciated that the barber was a serious and devout man, and, when asked to provide instructions on how an ordinary man could pray, Luther dedicated his response—the thirty-four-page book 'A Simple Way to Pray' (1535)—to his friend. Here, Luther recommends a set time for personal devotions, early morning or at night, and warns Master Peter against postponing for more urgent business. Luther spelled out his method in detail, first taking each petition of the Lord's Prayer and setting down a brief meditation, keyed to the text of the catechism and the current situation of the time, such as threats by the Turks and the papists. Luther argues that Christians must keep their mind on their prayer, just like a barber must watch his razor (LW 43, pp. 189–90)⁵. In addition to this more general exhortation to collect oneself and concentrate on one's prayer, Luther also suggests that one ought to speak or think as briefly as possible, for instance, using the following words:

O Heavenly Father, dear God, I am a poor unworthy sinner. I do not deserve to raise my eyes or hands toward thee or to pray. But because thou hast commanded us all to pray and hast promised to hear us and through thy dear Son Jesus Christ hast taught us both how and what to pray, I come to thee in obedience to thy word, trusting in thy gracious promise'. (LW 43, p. 194)

Taking his point of departure in 'Our Father' and God's promise to hear us when pronouncing this prayer, Luther leads his fellow Christians to the point where they do exactly as divinely commanded. The wording of the preferred prayer (see Matthew 6:9–13) is common to all Christians, regardless of whether they are Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Greek or Russian Orthodox. Yet Luther also considers the event that other words come to the worshiper's mind:

[I]f in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can. Remember what he says and note it well and you will behold wondrous things in the law of God, as David says (Ps. 119:18). (LW 43, pp. 201–2)

⁴ Luther's anti-Jewish rhetoric is not relevant in this context. For a thorough discussion of this problematic issue and references to the current debate, see (Welz 2018b).

⁵ *Luther's Works* is abbreviated as LW and quoted with the number of volume and page(s).

Thus, the movement goes from vocal prayer to silent listening, from using a predetermined scheme to letting the Holy Spirit address one personally. It is noteworthy that Luther localizes prayer in an ecclesial context next to the promulgation of the Gospel, which occupies a central place in Protestant theology. In his lectures on the Psalms, held between 1532 and 1535, Luther emphasizes the role of praise and thanksgiving, while he criticizes the ideal of wordless contemplation culminating in an ecstatic unification with God, where prayer is understood as a meritorious mystical elevation of the soul to God (*elevatio/ascensus mentis ad deum*) (see Mikoteit 2004, pp. 298–99; Werbick 2002, pp. 195–209).

According to French philosopher, theologian, and poet Jean-Louis Chrétien, who has a Roman-Catholic background, speech in prayer has priority over silence because only the speaking voice can keep quiet, and only speech can become silence: ‘The withdrawal or the suspension of the voice cannot be first, and vocal prayer is always presupposed, even if there are states of the religious life where it can become impossible or unwise. It founds all the other forms of prayer, which suspend or interiorize the voice’ (Chrétien 2000, p. 174). Thus, silent prayers are still constituted and defined by vocal prayer.

However, silence itself, as ‘a mark of respect and adoration’, can become a prayer when it is silence for and before the other (Chrétien 2000, p. 160). Silence ‘makes up a possibility proper to speech, which alone can fall into silence’; here, silence is an act of presence, not of privation, for silence before a You is still allocution (Chrétien 2000, p. 160). Chrétien references a beautiful hymn by Synesius of Cyrene, which beckons the wind, the birds, and the waters to fall silent, to demonstrate that God can be celebrated both with our voice and our silence: ‘Nature must keep quiet so that silence might become voice, and so that in it as in a treasured locket the human voice might resound’ (Chrétien 2000, p. 160). Silence in view of divine transcendence ‘says You, beyond all names’, like a gaze opened through speech, and the silence of prayer ‘is here a silence heard by God; it is still and always dialogue’ because a first, purely privative silence was broken (Chrétien 2000). It would be impossible for us to silently turn to God if our silence was due to our inability to speak. ‘But it belongs to prayer itself that in it alone does the praying man learn that he does not know how to pray’ (Chrétien 2000, p. 157). Chrétien points out that the shortcomings of speech can only be discovered in speaking, and that one can pray only by being turned toward God, and this is the ‘circularity’ of prayer: ‘Only a leap makes us enter into this circle. There are no prolegomena or preliminaries to prayer’ (Chrétien 2000, p. 157). Following Proclus, Chrétien holds that the desire to pray leads the desiring soul to the divine, and if wanting to pray is praying, the aporia of an infinite regression in prayer, where it would be necessary to pray before praying, is resolved.

Looking back at history, Chrétien cites thinkers who considered it to be essential to the effectiveness of prayer that it be audibly pronounced. He also shows the opposition between vocal and silent prayer to be complex. Both in biblical times and in pagan, Jewish, and Christian antiquity, prayers were spoken aloud: ‘In the ages when praying aloud was the rule, a prayer pronounced quietly, or simply murmured, could be called silent (*tacitus*)’ (see Chrétien 2000, p. 166). According to the Talmud, prayer must not be reduced to meditation; rather, we are supposed to speak with our lips (see Chrétien 2000, p. 166–67, referring to the Jerusalem Talmud, treatise Berakot IV). In the Christian Middle Ages, the *lectio divina* was understood as a prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures (see Chrétien 2000, p. 167).

The primacy of speech is also due to the fact that we manifest ourselves in and through the voice. In Thomas Aquinas’ view, we serve God not only with the mind but also with the body. In the voice, spirit and flesh are inseparable (see Chrétien 2000, p. 168, referring to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIa, IIae, q. 83, a. 12). Through the voice invested in vocal prayer, we both give and receive ourselves, just as we do in breathing.

Chrétien then highlights an additional aspect of vocal prayer, its public nature: ‘One prays to God, but ones [*sic!*] prays in the world’ (Chrétien 2000, p. 169). Chrétien quotes Seneca to convey the exhortation to speak with God as if others were listening, for if a prayer is heard by everyone, the praying persons are more likely to restrict themselves to that for which one can pray openly, while indecent or unjust contents are ruled out (see Chrétien 2000, p. 169, referring to Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*

Epistolae Morales I, 10, 5). Furthermore, the superiority of collective prayer is due to the fact that it contains a divine promise: ‘Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them’ (Matthew 18:19–20). The community also speaks for those who can no longer, or not yet, speak for themselves (see [Chrétien 2000](#), p. 170).

2.2. Silent Listening

Kierkegaard, by contrast, provides an argument in favor of silent listening. In the opening prayer to his three discourses on *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849), Kierkegaard asks our ‘Father in Heaven’ that we might learn from the lily and the bird, little by little, ‘what it is to be a human being’—and learn silence, obedience, and joy (KW XVIII, p. 3/SKS 11, p. 10).⁶ The subtitle of the collection characterizes the discourses as ‘godly’ (Danish: *Tre gudelige Taler*) (SKS 11, p. 7).⁷ According to the first discourse, the ability to be silent is an art precisely because the human being is able to speak: ‘In the deepest sense you shall make yourself nothing, become nothing before God, learn to be silent. In this silence is the beginning, which is to seek first God’s kingdom’ (KW XVIII, pp. 10–11/SKS 11, pp. 16–17)⁸. Just as the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of the fear of God is silence *coram deo*, because in it one’s many thoughts, wishes, and desires also fall silent.

Kierkegaard then refers to the ideal figure of the one who prays aright, to whom he dedicated an upbuilding discourse already in 1844, with the programmatic title ‘One Who Prays Aright Struggles in Prayer and Is Victorious—in That God Is Victorious’ (KW V, p. 377/SKS 5, p. 361). Kierkegaard claims that the one who prays aright knows that a human being is able to speak with God only ‘in much fear and trembling’ or else this is learned through prayer (KW XVIII, p. 11/SKS 11, p. 17). Wholehearted prayer allows for an amazing development:

Gradually, as he became more and more fervent in prayer, he had less and less to say, and finally, he became completely silent. [. . .] Indeed, he became what is, if possible, even more opposite to speaking than silence; he became a listener. He thought that to pray is to speak; he learned that to pray is not only to be silent but is to listen. And so it is; to pray is not to listen to oneself speak but is to become silent and to remain silent, to wait until the one praying hears God. (KW XVIII, pp. 11–12/SKS 11, pp. 17–18)⁹

This is the condition in which it becomes possible to become aware of the divine ‘voice.’ In silent listening, the supplicant is no longer afraid that (s)he might have forgotten something in praying to God and no longer occupied by making him- or herself rightly understood by God. Rather, through listening carefully, silence itself becomes ‘audible’ and expressive of faith. In Kierkegaard’s depiction, the bird is silent and waits because it fully and firmly believes ‘that everything takes place in its time’ even though the bird ‘is not entitled to know the time or day’ (KW XVIII, p. 13/SKS 11, p. 19).

⁶ The English edition of *Søren Kierkegaard’s Writings* is abbreviated as KW and quoted with the number of volume and page. The same applies to the Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*.

⁷ The Hongs (KW XVIII, 1) provide another, more vague translation: *Three Devotional Discourses*. As [Cappelørn \(2013, pp. 100–1\)](#) points out, this was the first and only time Kierkegaard used the designation ‘godly’—concerning a human being’s relationship to God as omnipotent creator and omnipresent sustainer—as a part of his hierarchy of discourses, which, before 1849, were classified as ‘edifying,’ ‘occasional,’ or ‘Christian.’ The second edition of *Either/Or* came out on the same day as the three godly discourses, which were published in Kierkegaard’s own name. Cappelørn sees the latter as ‘genuine counterparts to the pseudonymous author A and his aesthetic, rather nihilistic attitude toward life’ ([Cappelørn 2013, p. 104](#)).

⁸ As for the notion of self-annihilation in the sense of overcoming oneself, which is a sign of strength, as this requires a strong subject, see ([Welz 2012b](#)).

⁹ The last line of the Danish text contains the phrase ‘at komme til at tie, og at blive ved at tie, at bie, til den Bedende hører Gud’ (SKS 11, 18). Kierkegaard possibly alludes to a hymn by Hans Adolph Brorson, who meant much to him, cf. the text of Brorson’s church song no. 557 (written in 1765) in *Den Danske Salmebog*: ‘Her vil ties, her vil bies,/her vil bies, o svage sind!/Vist skal du hente, kun ved at vente,/kun ved at vente, vor sommer ind.’ Both Brorson and Kierkegaard point to the festive silence in nature as the place in which the human being can become aware of God’s voice. Thanks to Arne Grøn, for calling my attention to this parallel!

Similarly, also the lily is silent and waits without impatiently asking when spring will come or when we get rain or sunshine (see KW XVIII, p. 14/SKS 11, p. 19).

Waiting in silence, without complaint or accusation, is portrayed as the attitude that allows us the best possible way to cope with suffering. If we would voice all our suffering as we feel it, we would only feel it more intensely. In contrast, Kierkegaard assumes that if we had the silence of the bird and the lily, our suffering would certainly lessen (see KW XVIII, p. 15/SKS 11, pp. 20–21). By being silent about one's suffering, 'the suffering is simplified and particularized as much as possible and made as small as possible' (KW XVIII, p. 16/SKS 11, p. 21). By speaking about one's suffering, it becomes debatable how great the suffering actually is; therefore, Kierkegaard concludes that 'this indefiniteness increases the suffering immensely' (KW XVIII, p. 16/SKS 11, p. 22).

This might be the reason why Kierkegaard here chooses the opposite path to the one he took in his 1843 text *Repetition*, where he seems to side with the main character, a 'young man,' who not only laments his destiny but also identifies with the biblical Job to such an extent that he brings a charge against God. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard had a threefold reason to advocate the verbal expression of suffering:¹⁰

- (1) The young man argues for the therapeutic power of putting one's feelings into words. Job is a helpful role model because he encourages others not to silently suffer nameless agonies. He has found a language that provides relief for 'all who bore their torment in silence' (KW VI, p. 197).¹¹ Lament bursts the sufferer's isolation wide open. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's characterization of the fatalist further clarifies this point *ex negativo*: instead of believing that, for God, all things are possible at any moment, the fatalist sees nothing but necessity (see KW XIX, pp. 39–40). The existence of the self is 'like breathing (respiration), which is inhaling and exhaling,' and '[t]o pray is also to breathe' because 'possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing'; the fatalist, however, is unable to pray because his worship of God takes the form of 'mute capitulation' (KW XIX, p. 40). The belief that 'God's will is the possible' enables prayer—if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals' (KW XIX, pp. 40–41). The muteness of the despairing sufferer makes him (or her) withdraw from the world (see KW XIX, p. 70),¹² whereas the articulation of negative feelings can help to distance oneself from them. If they remain locked in, they poison the soul. Hence, lamentation in hope of God's help is as indispensable as the air we breathe.
- (2) It is Job's lament that provokes God's reaction. Job's lament is over as soon as he hears from God. In retrospect, his lament is an interim. While it is still going on, lament cannot be counteracted by a higher knowledge, as knowledge of God only comes about through interaction with God, the outcome of which cannot be anticipated: 'Job is, so to speak, the whole weighty defense plea on man's behalf in the great case between God and man, the lengthy and appalling trial that [...] ends with the whole thing having been an ordeal [*Prøvelse*]' (KW VI, p. 210/SKS 4, p. 77). The ordeal is a provisional (*midlertidig*) category (see KW VI, p. 210/SKS 4, p. 78), but it is essential as a kind of 'engine' that advances the process.
- (3) The young man argues that Job's lament actually leads him to regain his trust in God—if his trust has not implicitly been included in his lament all along. First, he asks Job: 'Why were you silent for seven days and nights [. . .]?' (KW VI, p. 197). It is uncertain whether Job's trust in God was unwavering throughout his ordeal. His silence is ambiguous. The young man is sure, however,

¹⁰ The three following paragraphs form a brief summary of the three arguments unraveled in (Welz 2009, pp. 121–24). On the concept of repetition, cf. (Eriksen 2000; Glöckner 1998).

¹¹ The motif of growing mute in the face of torment, combined with the polemics against poets, may be an allusion to *Torquato Tasso* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In Act V, Scene 5, it says: 'All other men are silent in their torment / A god lets me express my suffering' ('Und wo der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt, / Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide'). In the eyes of the young man, Job refutes the poet's privilege and asserts the expression of feelings as the right of all human beings.

¹² This is not to deny that silence, too, can be a form of lament in the widest sense of the word (i.e., physical, pathos-influenced, gesturally expressive, and verbally expressible behavior as a response to an experience); however, Kierkegaard maintains that lament should not remain mute and unspoken.

that Job proves his ‘fear of God [*Guds frygt*]’ (KW VI, p. 197/SKS 4, p. 67) not by nodding assent but by manifesting ‘the love and trust [*Tillid*] that are confident that God can surely explain everything if one can only speak with him’ (KW VI, p. 208/SKS 4, p. 76). Trust in God demands the act of addressing God without reservation.

Now, has Kierkegaard changed his mind to such an extent that he in his 1849 discourses maintains the polar opposite of his 1843 *Repetition*? I do not think so. Rather, as the above-quoted lines from the discourse on the lily and the bird show, Kierkegaard describes a process of praying that begins with verbal prayer, then turns into silence and, finally, into listening without uttering any words: ‘He thought that to pray is to speak; he learned that to pray is not only to be silent but is to listen’ (KW XVIII, pp. 11–12/SKS 11, pp. 17–18).

2.3. Silent Adoration and Obedience to God

Silence is valued insofar as it is equivalent to self-forgotten adoration of God as the One who governs the whole world. For Kierkegaard, the finest prayer is silent, attentive listening out of reverence for God. The silence of the lily and the bird is exemplary as it ‘expresses respect for God, that it is He who rules and He alone to whom wisdom and understanding are due. And just because this silence is veneration for God, is worship, as it can be in nature, this silence is so solemn’ (KW XVIII, p. 16/SKS 11, p. 22).

In extension of the petitions in ‘Our Father,’ Kierkegaard demands that the one who prays shall even forget his or her own name, ‘the famous name, the wretched name, the insignificant name, in order in silence to pray to God: ‘Hallowed be *your* name!’ In directly addressing the reader, he continues: ‘Would that in silence you might forget yourself, your plans, the great, all-encompassing plans, or the limited plans for your life and its future, in order in silence to pray to God: ‘Your kingdom come!’ Would that in silence you might forget your will, your self-will, in order in silence to pray to God: ‘*Your* will be done!’’ (KW XVIII, pp. 18–19/SKS 11, p. 24). It is important to note that this silent prayer is not a wordless one. However, the words used help the one who prays to focus not on his or her own sorrows or ambitions but rather on God’s name and will. Kierkegaard here draws on Christianity’s most powerful and influential prayer, whose words are handed down from Jesus himself, and renders the personal pronoun, which indicates the vocative, in italics (Danish: ‘*Dit* Navn’; ‘*Din* Villie’) (KW XVIII, pp. 18–19/SKS 11, p. 24).

The second of Kierkegaard’s three discourses on the lily and the bird takes up this clue. It is about obedience in a conflict of power and attachments. This conflict surfaces in the title of the discourse: ‘No One Can Serve Two Masters, for He Must Either Hate the One and Love the Other or Be Devoted to the One and Despise the Other.’ In line with the first discourse, Kierkegaard argues that to become silent is the condition of truly being able to obey (KW XVIII, p. 24/SKS 11, p. 29). In a remarkable play of words, Kierkegaard connects the themes of sound and perfect obedience to the possibility of hearing God in nature, where all creatures—apart from the human being—do and accept their Creator’s will:

The sighing of the wind, the echoing of the forest, the murmuring of the brook, the humming of the summer, the whispering of the leaves, the rustling of the grass, every sound [*Lyd*], every sound you hear is all compliance [*Adlyd*], unconditional obedience [*Lydighed*]. Thus, you can hear God in it just as you hear him in the harmony that is the movement of the celestial bodies in obedience’. (KW XVIII, p. 25/SKS 11, p. 30)

Since neither the wind, the forest, or the brook, nor the plants or animals question God’s omnipotence, they are absolutely obedient to His will, which for this reason can manifest itself in nature. Human beings, on the contrary, can be tempted by disobedience when ambivalent about God. It is only when we are in a state of ‘sheer simplicity before God,’ without any ambivalence, that we can be ‘unconditionally obedient to God.’ Then, Kierkegaard affirms, the petition ‘Lead us not into temptation’ will be heard (KW XVIII, p. 32/SKS 11, p. 37). Only then is Satan powerless, and that is why we need to learn from the lily and the bird, whose solemn silence ‘expresses the unconditional

obedience with which everything serves only one master, turns in service toward only one, joined in perfect unity, in one great divine service' (KW XVIII, p. 35/SKS 11, p. 39).

3. Prayer—Dialogue with God?

Provided that silent listening is essential to prayer, is it then appropriate to understand prayer as a dialogue with God? To anticipate the result of my considerations, opposing dialogue with God to silent listening is a false alternative because no dialogue can come about if the conversational partners lack attention to each other. That said, we are just at the beginning of the task of clarifying what it means to pray. Can prayer be understood analogously to a dialogue between two human beings?

3.1. A Language Leading Us to Understand That We Cannot Understand God

Since we can neither see God's 'countenance' visually nor hear His 'voice' acoustically, it is doubtful whether the God-relationship corresponds to interhuman relations in terms of communication. In *The Concept of Prayer* (1965), a book that has become a classic, Dewi Z. Phillips raises the following questions: 'If God is not a participant in language, how can one say anything to God? How can one tell him anything?' (Phillips 1965, p. 53). Phillips' questions are obviously shaped by the Wittgensteinian tradition. If God is omniscient, He does not need information and cannot be said to come to know anything He did not know beforehand. On the one hand, we cannot avoid figural language when speaking of God. For instance, when imagining God like someone who has ears to hear, eyes to see, and a mouth to speak, we use metaphors that are rooted in our own sensory experience. On the other hand, such anthropomorphous descriptions are hardly adequate to characterize the Creator of the universe.

The concept of God harbors a constitutive tension: if we define God as a particular person who can be distinguished from other entities, so that we can understand Him as a counterpart with whom we can communicate in prayer, we miss God as the source and principle of life interweaving everything—for how does God's personality, individuality, or singularity go together with His immeasurability, omnipresence, or infinity?¹³ Suffice it to say that the practice of prayer presupposes that we can address ourselves to God, and that there must be some language, verbal or non-verbal, through which we can be in touch with God.

Phillips concedes that prayers do not depend on certain words: 'Prayers, unlike certain spells, are not ruined by a slip of the tongue' (Phillips 1965, p. 119). God cannot be deceived or manipulated. Paradoxically, in praying to a God whom we cannot grasp intellectually, we can come to understand that we cannot understand God (Phillips 1965, pp. 61–62). Through prayer, we may gain some familiarity with God, yet His foreignness does not decrease. Our finite human intellect is too limited to grasp God's infinity. However, in speaking to God and listening to Him, we can at least learn what or how God is not. For instance, God is not identical with any specific object or person in the world, and God does not react in exactly the same ways as human dialogue partners do, who might shout at each other or say things that they afterward regret. If God, for the most part, 'speaks' through His silence, we may forever marvel at the divine mystery and gain insight in the ways in which God communicates with human beings. Still, the aim of prayer is not primarily the knowledge of God, but rather human self-knowledge. Following Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourse* on 'The Purity of Heart' (1847), Phillips argues that prayer does not change God, but the one who offers it (cf. Phillips 1965, p. 56).

Phillips affirms that prayer is not just a monologue. The praying person is truly directed to another: 'If one denies that there is a distinction between man and God, then, of course, one is no longer able to speak of prayer as talking to God,' and 'there can be nothing like love of God in monism, since one does not have there the belief that one depends on God for what one is' (Phillips 1965, p. 77). The ideal of an *unio mystica*, where human beings are absorbed in God, precludes prayer. If there was

¹³ I have discussed this elsewhere, cf. (Welz 2016).

nothing else apart from God, God's presence would be total, all-inclusive, all-embracing. In a state where God has become identical with the world, there is nothing left to say.

3.2. Reversal of Intentionality in Prayer

Another difference between interhuman dialogue and prayer is located at the beginning of the interlocution: when two human beings talk with each other, either may start the conversation; prayer, by contrast, does not begin with the one praying, but with the One to whom we turn in prayer. Prayer is called forth by its addressee. This means that intentionality, in prayer, is reversed in taking on the form of responsivity:

Intentionality is the directedness of consciousness to an intentional object. The latter can be something about which I think or something I want to achieve. While the 'arrow' of intentionality springs from an experiencing subject and moves towards that which it experiences, the 'arrow' of responsivity points in the opposite direction: it proceeds from something or someone else and reaches out to 'me' (cf. Waldenfels 2001, pp. 67–69, 76–77, 80–84). As the subject of vision, for instance, I want to see you and in this very movement I may suddenly discover that I am also seen by you. I am then no longer a subject in the nominative ('I see'), but find myself in the accusative, being seen by you (who sees 'me').

The Hebrew *hinneni*, Abraham's 'here am I' answering to God's call, becomes *me voici* in French. There is a reversal of intentionality in prayer. Instead of wanting to gain or accomplish something specific through prayer, the praying person becomes reached, moved, and obligated by something that remains out of reach.

Emmanuel Levinas speaks of prayer as *prière sans demande*: a prayer without demand, petition, or supplication addressed to God, consisting only in the elevation of the soul to the heights and its surrender to God (see Levinas 2009, pp. 232–33). Through such a prayer, understood as 'the service of the heart,' human beings loosen the ties of their egotistic attachment to being, and 'instead of seeking one's own salvation, one secures that of others' (Levinas 2009, p. 233). In emphasizing that true prayer is never for oneself, Levinas follows *Nefesh ha'Hayyim* (*Soul of Life*), the posthumously published work by Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner (1759–1821). Levinas asks whether the Talmud itself authorizes individual supplications alongside prayers that honor the glory of God, then answers that it does, 'but only in those circumstances where Israel as a whole is in danger, when its people are persecuted and held in contempt' (Levinas 2009, p. 233; cf. Robbins 2005). According to *Nefesh ha'Hayyim*, one does not need to pray with respect to one's suffering because 'God, prior to any demand, is already there with me' (Levinas 2009, p. 234), and with everyone who is in trouble, God Himself is suffering through human suffering.

Instead of trying to persuade God to act on one's own behalf, the one praying is to be patient and attentive. Instead of formulating eloquent prayers, the reversal of intentionality implies that we, first of all, need to listen, and then obediently respond to whatever shows itself to be God's will. In this point, Levinas concurs with Kierkegaard.

3.3. Prayer as a Divine Gift

In a similar vein, Chrétien holds that prayer is dependent on the power to whom it is addressed: 'It is the act by which the man praying stands in the presence of a being in which he believes but does not see and manifests himself to it' (Chrétien 2000, p. 149). In Chrétien's view, prayer is not primarily a theophany, a manifestation of God, but rather an anthropophany: a manifestation of the human being before God (see Chrétien 2000, p. 150). Just like Phillips and Levinas, Chrétien emphasizes that prayer is not a soliloquy. To pray does not mean to speak with oneself, but rather to address an invisible other that radically transforms the dialogue with oneself. Moreover, prayer modifies the speaker, not its addressee (see Chrétien 2000, p. 151). Praying verbally can help us to gather our thoughts, and to gather ourselves before God (see Chrétien 2000, p. 154). The so-called 'circularity' of prayer implies that 'the man praying prays in order to know how to pray, and first of all to learn

that he does not know how, and he offers thanks for his prayer as a gift from God. One can be turned to God only in praying, and one can pray only by being turned toward God' (Chrétien 2000, p. 157). Hence, the one who prays must already have received that for which he or she prays. Prayer is always already preceded by the one who calls it forth and to whom it responds, be it in speech or in silence (see Chrétien 2000, pp. 158, 160).

When God is adored, even the silence of prayer speaks. It 'says' *you* to God and hopes to be 'heard' by Him—and yet God's hearing comes before human speech. The human voice is said to resonate 'in and through a silent hearing' that has forever 'awaited' it (Chrétien 2000, p. 161). Therefore, even the most supplicating of demanding prayers has already received: it has received the power to ask of God; to address itself to Him (see Chrétien 2000, p. 162). Interestingly, Chrétien refers to the mystical Persian poet Rûmî (1207–73) to illustrate that the desire for God can be regarded as a gift of God (see Chrétien 2000, pp. 163–64).

This idea might be able to unite Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rûmî evokes a man who prays fervently and to whom Satan objects: 'O little chatterbox, to all these 'Allah's,' where is the 'Here I am'? No response has come from the throne of God.' This inspires doubt and discouragement, before the divine response comes from the mouth of a wise man: 'This 'Allah' that you utter is my 'Here I am'.' These words are put into God's mouth, and His divine speech continues as follows: 'Your supplication, your sorrow, your fervor are My messenger to you. Your projects and your efforts to find a means to reach Me, this is in reality Me myself who would draw you toward me and free your feet' (Chrétien 2000, pp. 163–64 quoting Rûmî 1990, p. 542).¹⁴ Chrétien comments: 'The response is in the call, and reverberates in it. The vocative of the invocation is not simply the place of the praying man's presence to God, but that of God's presence to the praying man' (Chrétien 2000, p. 164). The very prayer that responds to God's call by invoking Him anticipates His answer in bringing about divine-human co-presence.

God transcendent is near enough to be reached by our prayer, even if it is prayed *de profundis*, out of the depths of suffering and despair. When we pray, God comes, metaphorically speaking, within earshot. If it is Him who prays in us, which is one way of expressing the enveloping and mutual intertwining of the divine and human calls, we cannot, without God, even lament about being forsaken by Him.

With reference to Philo the Jew, Chrétien points out that the human being is 'a creature whose most proper act, the one integrally its own, is to offer thanks, since all that could be offered to God already belongs to him, except the very act by which we thank' (Chrétien 2000, pp. 173–74), and this is the reason why the human voice can become a place where the world returns to God. The voice can, according to Chrétien, 'give itself only because it is not in possession of itself' (Chrétien 2000, p. 174). In other words: we owe everything to God, including the possibility to say 'thank you.'

Hence, prayer may well be understood as a dialogue between God and human beings, yet as a very special one that differs from interhuman dialogue in at least three respects: First, dialogue with an all-knowing God who remains beyond understanding implicates that the aim of the divine–human encounter is neither to convey information nor to influence God, but to come to a new understanding of oneself. Second, God's eternity, surpassing temporality, entails that God's initiative always comes first and antedates any human movement towards Him. Third, the asymmetry between divine and human agency and potency implies that every prayer is a gift that the praying person has received from the One who is supposed to answer the prayer.

This brings us to the next question, which approaches the meaning of prayer *ex negativo*: what is meant by the metaphor of God's 'silence'? Does it downright deny the idea and experience that

¹⁴ The headline of this passage runs as follows: *Montrant que l'invocation de celui qui supplie Dieu est essentiellement la même chose que la réponse de Dieu.*

God somehow ‘speaks’ to us, or can it include the proviso that God’s ‘silence’ may be of a transitional nature, thus negating only the idea of a continual conversation?

4. God’s ‘Silence’ after Auschwitz—Divine Absence or Hiddenness?

The addition ‘after Auschwitz’ indicates that God’s ‘silence’ is conceived not as having lasted since time immemorial, from the beginning of the world, but as linked to a particular historical event: the Shoah. In his book *To Mend the World* (1982), Emil Ludwig Fackenheim famously claims that the continuity between past and present is broken because the Holocaust ‘is a total rupture’ (Fackenheim 1994, p. 250). According to Fackenheim, historical continuity is shattered for two reasons—one of them is anthropological, the other theological. Quoting Elie Wiesel (1928–2016), Fackenheim explains that ‘at Auschwitz, not only man died, but also the idea of man’ (Fackenheim 1994, p. 230, referring to Wiesel 1968); quoting Martin Buber, he claims that our ‘estrangement’ from God has become so ‘cruel’ that, even if He were to speak to us, we have no way of understanding how to recognize Him (Fackenheim 1994, p. 230).¹⁵

4.1. *Hester Panim: God Hiding Himself*

As Fackenheim has it, the Holocaust shook the religious core of Buber’s thought. Buber’s thought centers around dialogical speech, where the divine–human dialogue confers meaning on all speech. While in *I and Thou* (published in 1923 as *Ich und Du*) Buber had taught that ‘God speaks constantly,’ he was later moved to fall back on the traditional Jewish doctrine of the ‘hiding of the Face’ and asserted that ‘an ‘eclipse of God’, possible at any time, is actual in our time’ (Fackenheim 1994, p. 196). Buber’s book *Gottesfinsternis*, to which Fackenheim alludes here, appeared after WWII, in 1953.

The Afterword to *I and Thou* was written in 1957. We can read there that God ‘enters into a direct relationship to us human beings through creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relationship to him’ (Buber 1970, p. 181). Furthermore, Buber mentions ‘God’s address to man,’ penetrating the events in all our lives; the existence of ‘mutuality between God and man,’ and, remarkably, interhuman I–You relationships that become transfigured ‘in the countenance of God’ (Buber 1970, p. 182). If Buber had regarded God as completely hidden, he would not have written about the transformative power of His countenance in this way, and he would have corrected his own statements in Part III of the book about ‘the eternal revelation that is present in the here and now’—the revelation of the God who presented Himself with the Hebrew words *Ehyeh asher ehyey* (Exodus 3:14), translated by Buber into German as *Ich bin da als der ich da bin*, which corresponds to ‘I am there as whoever I am there’ (Buber 1970, p. 160). In these words, God does not define Himself, but assures us of His divine presence. Buber continues: ‘The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more’ (Buber 1970, p. 160). And nothing less.

Buber seems to think that God’s hiddenness is only temporary and does no harm to His being-with-us. As he puts it in the Third Part of *I and Thou*, God, the eternal You, ‘never ceases, in accordance with its nature to be You for us’ (Buber 1970, p. 147). But why, then, is it not always possible to perceive God’s presence? Buber affirms: ‘To be sure, whoever knows God also knows God’s remoteness and the agony of drought upon a frightened heart, but not the loss of presence. Only we are not always there’ (Buber 1970, p. 147). Buber takes seriously the fact that God’s presence is not always palpable. Yet, in Buber’s view, the reason for this is not God’s withdrawal, but rather our having moved away from God. This was the *status quo ante bellum*, and Buber did not change these statements after the Shoah.

Let us now return to Fackenheim’s sketch of the development of Buber’s thought. Fackenheim cites two long passages from Buber’s lecture ‘The Dialogue between Heaven and Earth,’ originally delivered

¹⁵ Cf. pp. 196–97, where Fackenheim refers to Buber (1952), p. 61 and the following pages. The quote stems from p. 61. Buber ends his book with a conclusion that differs from Fackenheim’s: ‘Though His coming appearance resembles no earlier one, we shall recognize again our cruel and merciful Lord.’ (Buber 1952, p. 62).

in 1951. Here, Buber asks not only how a Jewish life is still possible ‘after Oswiecim,’ the Polish name for Auschwitz, but reframes the question as ‘how is a life with God still possible in a time in which there is an Oswiecim?’ (Fackenheim 1994, p. 196; Buber 1952, p. 61). This formulation shows that the destruction, the genocide, the catastrophe that the name ‘Auschwitz’ intimates will never be past, but determines the future as well. One cannot just get over it. In this connection, Buber establishes: ‘The estrangement has become too cruel, the hiddenness too deep’ (Buber 1952, p. 61). He then raises a series of questions that intensify the indication of a disturbance, breach, or even disruption of the God-relationship: ‘One can still ‘believe’ in the God who allowed those things to happen, but can one still speak to Him? Can one still hear His word? Can one still, as an individual and as a people, enter at all into a dialogic relationship with Him? Can one still call to Him?’ (Buber 1952, p. 61). Pay attention to the inverted commas and the unanswered rhetorical questions: the propositions of belief become separated from direct speech to God and the ability to be closely related to Him. Buber then confronts the biblical tradition of sufferers crying to God with the monstrosity of evil in the 20th century: ‘Dare we recommend to the survivors of Oswiecim, the Job of the gas chambers: ‘Call to Him, for He is kind, for His mercy endures forever’?’ (Buber 1952, p. 61).¹⁶

In what follows, Buber argues that Job received God’s answer in the form of God’s appearance: ‘Nothing is explained, nothing adjusted; wrong has not become right, nor cruelty kindness. Nothing has happened but that man again hears God’s address’ (Buber 1952, p. 62). The idea of God appearing visually, which is implied in the verse saying that Job’s eye saw God (Job 42: 5), has here acquired an auditory dimension. However, Buber makes it clear that the mystery remains unresolved. Speaking in the name of all those who will never get over what happened in Auschwitz, Buber defiantly announces the will to struggle for the redemption of the world: ‘struggling we appeal to the help of our Lord, Who is again and still a hiding one. In such a state we await His voice, whether it come out of the storm or out of a stillness which follows it’ (Buber 1970, p. 62). In alluding to 1 Kings 19:12, a text that tells us that YHWH was neither in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, but appeared to Elijah in a gentle whisper (*qol d^e mamah daqah*), Buber implicitly compares biblical times to modern times, leaving open the question concerning what God’s future revelation may look like.

He seems determined to detect at least some recognizable features of the God of our fathers, although this God can no longer be regarded as an unambiguously good God. Buber’s God manifests Himself in an unprecedented manner, uniting the opposed traits of cruelty and mercy: ‘Though His coming appearance resemble no earlier one, we shall recognize again our cruel and merciful Lord’ (Fackenheim 1994, p. 197).¹⁷ Note that such divine duplexity, expressed in this concluding sentence of Buber’s lecture, can no longer be captured with the help of metaphors like the one of the sun that may, for a time, be hidden behind the clouds but still persists without us being able to see its radiant light and feel its warmth, for one can no longer reckon with the permanence of God’s goodness. Thus, God’s hiddenness concerns not only His fundamental unknowability, but also a scary form of ambivalence in relation to His creatures, which makes it hard to place one’s trust in Him. The last-mentioned quote from Buber’s lecture does not rule out the possibility that God’s face can no longer be recognized and that His voice remains mute.

Like Kierkegaard, Buber believes that nature ‘is full of God’s utterance, if one but hears it’ (Buber 1952, p. 57). Nature always expresses the glory of God, whereas history at times can seem ‘empty of God’ (Buber 1952, p. 58), without any sign of God’s presence and without any address to us that would announce a dialogic relationship. God hides His face in human history. If genocide is related to God’s work at all, it must be His *opus alienum*, a foreign work that conceals, rather than reveals, Him.

¹⁶ Quoted in Fackenheim 1994, p. 196, though in a different translation.

¹⁷ Fackenheim is citing Buber 1952, p. 62, though in a different translation.

4.2. God's Reputed Absence and a Feminist Approach to Post-Holocaust Theology

Once we cannot recognize God any more, we can no longer proclaim His presence in the world. God's silence in the face of human suffering has often been interpreted as abandonment and divine absence. Admittedly, it is difficult to experientially distinguish God's non-intervention in the Shoah from His non-existence. Melissa Raphael is right in arguing that what is perceived as divine absence may approximate 'the displacement of a particular model of God' (Raphael 2003, p. 52) that included divine attributes like omnipotence combined with justice and love.

However, if we follow Melissa Raphael's lead and ask not '*where* was God in Auschwitz?' but rather '*who* was God in Auschwitz?' (see Raphael 2003, p. 54), we are faced with a new task, namely to consider how we can become present to each other in such a way that God's countenance and voice can be intuited in interhuman encounters. In her pioneering study *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* (2003), Raphael builds upon published testimonies of women imprisoned at Auschwitz-Birkenau and interprets relationships of care for other persons as an invitation of God's presence into an extermination camp, a place on earth that would most repel it. Raphael sees a restoration of the human and the divine in women's attempts to wash, cover, and protect bodies of suffering. She offers an alternative to theories of divine absence or temporary hiddenness by taking up the concept of the Shekinah, the female figure of divine presence accompanying Israel into exile. Raphael argues that God's face was revealed in the faces of the women who turned to the assaulted other and thereby performed non-violent acts of resistance against the degradation and genocidal erasure of humanity. She suggests a feminist approach to post-Holocaust theology, which beholds moments of *tikkun olam*—of the repair of the world: in good deeds, thoughts, and prayer (see Raphael 2003, pp. 159–60).

4.3. Breaking the Silence

While Raphael concentrates on ethical and spiritual acts that can visualize God's invisible presence, her approach can nonetheless be transferred to the realm of audition. At a place where the brute commandos of Kapos, the noises of iron doors in the crematoria, and the anguished screams of the dying resound in the ears of the victims, the film *Son of Saul* (2015) by László Nemes, which follows a Hungarian member of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz, gives a harrowing impression of these sounds of hell—the greatest challenge consists of discovering and identifying God's voice. This seems a task of sheer impossibility. If God can become present among us only when and where human beings alleviate each other's suffering, His presence is occluded when- and wherever this is not the case. We cannot hear His voice where it is drowned out by the screams of others, and in deadly silence we miss His salvific silence. Conversely, if we are to imagine how such a silence can be broken, we might, for instance, think of soft and consoling voices; of wordless sighs and signs of compassion; of crying in solidarity with those who cry; and of humorous gestures that inspire laughter in spite of it all.

What I find particularly thought-provoking is the idea that human beings who are created *b'tselem elohim*, as or in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), can reflect His presence in their ways of being present to each other. The Jerusalem poet Elazar Benyoëtz has, in one of his aphorisms, demonstrated how the optical imagery that symbolizes a mimetic relationship between God and the human *imago Dei* can be translated into acoustic metaphors, while taking into account that there also remains a dissimilarity between God and humankind: 'Hätte Gott eine Stimme, wir wären sein Widerhall' (Benyoëtz 2009, p. 136), which can be translated as: 'If God had a voice, we would be His echo.'

Following this line of thought, we may conclude that God's alleged 'silence' after Auschwitz is broken only when and where human beings are breaking deathlike silences, and that the divine voice can only be heard in and through human voices that speak in a way that resembles His. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that God's voice is concealed *sub contrario*. If we regard the world as God's place of concealment, it stands to reason that God's singular voice can reveal itself only in the plurality and polyphony of human voices. Therefore, if we do not want to say that God vocalizes

Himself in the guise of any human voice, we need a criterion for distinguishing voices and spirits. This brings us to the last couple of questions to be discussed.

5. How Can We Know God's Will and Whether a Prayer Has Been Answered?

When someone comes to curse God, we can hardly claim that God is speaking through this voice, damning Himself. Just as little as the Creator is identical with His creatures is God's voice equivalent to whatever reaches our ears. There is a danger of confusing the medium for God's message with His own Word. We can come to mishear and misunderstand and wrongly equate what is poles apart. Is there a chance that we may be corrected in the process of prayer?

5.1. Consonance?

Insofar as prayer involves the search for God, and we are ready to wait for Him to show His will, our own misconceptions are being tested. However, this takes time, and the process is open-ended. We need to listen carefully again and again, for neither harmony nor disharmony with others can itself count as a guarantee that we are doing what God wants us to do. That for which we have prayed might receive positive feedback in a given community, yet 'social resonance' cannot grant that God's 'reply' is identical with the responses from our fellow human beings.

Therefore, while it is tempting to hypothesize that correspondence to God's will manifests itself in consonance, there is no proof that this is so. If consonance arises over time, it requires that new sounds are in tune with already existing sounds. Applied to divine revelation, consonance requires that the 'voice of God' presently heard corresponds to the 'word of God' laid down in the Scriptures and the oral tradition. As long as there is no divine voice that rings down from heaven, the 'chord' between the old and the new, the known and the unknown 'word of God' cannot be recorded with the help of technology; it is there only for the 'ears of faith' that might hear something else than the 'ears of disbelief.' In any case, this metaphorical 'chord' or 'consonance' presupposes the work of interpretation.

As Fackenheim's concern for post-Holocaust hermeneutics teaches us, the art and theory of understanding and interpretation is seriously called into question by the Shoah. Paul Mendes-Flohr has argued that scholarly reconstruction and explanation threaten to overshadow the mourner's lament: 'Remembrance refuses to understand, for to understand means to tame the inherently incomprehensible; understanding seeks to cauterize an inconsolable loss with the balm of explanation' (Mendes-Flohr 2003, p. 252). This is also true for theology. In view of inconceivable crimes, the refusal to explain God's role and to find an excuse for Him might be the most intuitive reaction. Yet, while respecting the limits of understanding, there is a need, paradoxically, to understand why one cannot understand. That is why it is worth asking how God can answer prayers at all.

5.2. God's Indirect but Personal Answer

In his book *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* (1984), Vincent Brümmer declares that God's agency in the world is almost always to mediate: 'He acts by means of secondary causes' (Brümmer 2008, p. 69). This is so because God is not 'a direct causal agent on the same level as all other causal agents in the world' (Brümmer 2008, p. 70). According to Brümmer, God can answer our prayers without violating the natural order. God can bring about contingent events within the order of nature and enlighten, enable and motivate human agents to realize His intentions (Brümmer 2008, p. 82). Since God is not observable, His acts are seen only indirectly, 'in the effects of natural causes and human actions' (Brümmer 2008, p. 83). The problem is that we cannot just 'infer divine agency from our empirical perception of the world' (Brümmer 2008, p. 147). Rather, religious experience entails an interpretation of that which we perceive with our senses, and we need spiritual training if we want to be able to discern the works of God within the conceptual framework of faith (Brümmer 2008, p. 151). However, since even believers belonging to the same denomination can disagree about God's will and God's answer, how do we decide who is right? Hearing, no less than reading, is a hermeneutical process.

On one of his *Zettel*, Ludwig Wittgenstein noted down: ‘You can’t hear God speaking to someone else, you can hear him only if you are the addressee’¹⁸. It is characteristic of the pragmatics of prayer that God speaks so convincingly that the addressee has no doubt that he or she is ‘meant.’ We cannot rationally substantiate, verify, or falsify God’s speech, but the one who trusts in God does not need any external justification of His divinity, and the one who questions His credibility is already catapulted outside of the hermeneutical circle within which God’s self-revelation is meaningful. Thus, God can only answer our prayers in a personal encounter where the one who turns to God in prayer is the only one who can receive His response. This response is most often an indirect one, mediated either through the words of others or by one’s own state of mind, for instance, by turning the upheaval of emotions into the calm and composed acceptance of that which cannot be changed.

While divine presence can be identified in interhuman encounters if the persons involved have the ‘sensorium’ for it and interpret their encounters accordingly, it is impossible to empirically prove God’s presence. We cannot prove that God is really speaking through certain words, deeds, or gestures. If God can only answer our prayers indirectly, taking the detour of worldly events and interhuman encounters, and if He sometimes even reveals Himself in what is opposed to our ideas of divinity and holiness, then neither social resonance nor consonance with religious tradition can make sure that we are indeed faced with God’s response. Rather, we are challenged to listen afresh and to search for God’s ‘voice’ again and again, without ever being able to pinpoint it.

5.3. *Being Addressed*

Finally, let us consider the case of the afflicted person who pours out his or her complaint before God (cf. Psalm 102:1). What to do if God does not answer at all, let alone change the course of things, as wished?

The Jerusalem polymath Yeshayahu Leibowitz criticized the type of the prayer that is nothing more than a psychological expression of an inner impulse, and an action performed for one’s own needs, whether material, intellectual, or emotional. In his view, the prayer shaped by the Jewish prayer book is an entirely different matter: it is obligatory and fixed, not what a person desires, but what is imposed upon him or her, come what may (see Leibowitz 1992, p. 30). Its sole meaning is to serve God by taking upon oneself ‘the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven’ and setting aside all personal interests (Leibowitz 1992, p. 31). Regardless of how we understand the will of God, one thing is sure: mandatory prayer demands that one relinquishes one’s own will and recognizes the duty of worship. ‘The same set of eighteen benedictions is required of the bridegroom as of the widower returning from his wife’s funeral. The same series of psalms is recited by one enjoying the world and one whose world has collapsed’ (Leibowitz 1992, p. 32). Leibowitz underlines that prayer is not the impudent demand that God change the world’s regularity for the benefit of the person praying, but a worshipful stance, which leads to the longing that God’s great Name shall be magnified and sanctified in the world (see Leibowitz 1992, pp. 34–35).

In Leibowitz’s view, ‘no prayer is without response! Since true prayer is the expression of one’s intention to serve God, in praying one carries out this very intention’ (Leibowitz 1992, p. 35). According to Leibowitz, speaking of ‘prayer that evokes a response’ is a tautology, and speaking of ‘prayer without response’ an absurdity. He quotes Psalm 145:18, which corroborates his argument: ‘God is near to all those who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth’. Akin to Chrétien, Leibowitz finds God’s answer in the very prayer directed to Him.

¹⁸ (Wittgenstein 1981, §717): ‘Gott kannst du nicht mit einem Andern reden hören, sondern nur, wenn du der Angeredete bist.’—Das ist eine grammatische Bemerkung.’

6. Conclusions

To conclude, let me sum up the results of my investigation. Four questions have guided us through the process of developing a theological phenomenology of listening:

- (1) The first concerns the relation between speech and silence in prayer. We saw that Luther, Kierkegaard, and Chrétien agree on prioritizing spoken prayer—above all because God Himself has told us how to speak to Him, but also because only the speaking voice can keep quiet, and because we manifest ourselves in our audible voice, and can include those who cannot speak for themselves in our prayer. Yet silent listening is appreciated if it expresses veneration and allows us to ‘hear God’ and heed His Word in obedience without too much self-centeredness. Then the silence before God, which is ‘heard’ by Him, also counts as a kind of ‘dialogue.’ Moreover, the way from lament to silent listening is, according to Kierkegaard, the preferable path when working through suffering with God’s help. This path ultimately leads to self-forgotten adoration.
- (2) In what sense can prayer be legitimately termed a ‘dialogue’ with God? Following Dewi Z. Phillips, Levinas, and Chrétien, we found that insofar as prayer is truly directed towards God and not to oneself, it is a dialogue rather than a monologue. Yet, the relation between the partners of conversation is asymmetric insofar as even our search for God is called forth by Him whose response already lies in our addressing Him. God cannot be ‘known’ by us, but lets us gain self-knowledge in the process of our praying to Him—a process that is the gift of Him becoming co-present with us.
- (3) What does it mean to speak of God’s ‘silence’ after Auschwitz—is God completely ‘absent’ or just ‘hidden’? Fackenheim’s answer amounts to divine absence in the sense of non-recognizability, whereas Buber addresses the problem of *hester panim* as a challenge to the dialogic relationship with God, yet nonetheless appealed to Him in the hope that He may speak to us again. It is precisely in the combination of cruelty and mercy that Buber sees features that characterize the biblical God who, from time to time, hides His countenance. Raphael taught us that God’s reputed ‘absence’ may be understood as the falsification of certain ideas of God and His presumed omnipotence. Raphael’s alternative to theories of divine absence and hiddenness is the endeavor to identify divine presence in encounters between people. Similarly, Benyoëtz suggests listening to the ‘echo’ of God’s silent voice in human voices. Thus, God’s ‘silence’ does not necessarily imply His absence or hiddenness. Most often it means that our human ability to listen is atrophied. However, the question of how we can make Him speak again, or how we can adequately listen displaces the theological problem and turns it into an ethical one. This move may empower human agents, but it does not bring back the belief in God as the Lord of history who masterfully governs the universe.
- (4) Given that God’s ‘silence’ (or His being silenced) constitutes a breach in the God-relationship, how can we identify what God wants us to say and do, and how can we know whether a prayer has been answered? We tested the hypothesis that there should be a ‘consonance’ between the ‘word of God’ in the biblical tradition and what is taken as a new manifestation of God’s will. Not only does the realization of a correspondence require a comparison that lays down two states of affairs next to one another, but also a *tertium comparationis* in the light of which they can be interpreted. If God no longer speaks to us nor brings His will to our knowledge in other recognizable ways, the benchmark is missing. Brümmer’s book prepares us for God acting indirectly, mediated by the deeds of other agents; yet, as Wittgenstein noted down, we can only ‘hear’ God speaking when we ourselves are the addressees. Leibowitz clarified that there is no prayer without a response because God’s ‘answer’ is always already part of the invocation that asks for a response.

Instead of restricting the scope of events, words, or other experiences that may count as a divine response to human prayer, my considerations want to open up for the possibility that God may operate even in situations in which we would never expect Him to. As the great hearing One at the center of

the universe who hears our speech (cf. Morton 1985, pp. 54–55), God may surprise us by giving us more than we had ever asked of Him.

7. Postscript

Here is a personal story of being addressed surprisingly, serendipitously: When preparing the present text, a parcel arrived. It was sent by a friend I had not heard from for some time. I unwrapped one of the small packages within the parcel and found a stone formed as a heart. In a groove, there was another tiny stone, also formed as a heart, the smaller resting on the larger. My friend enclosed a letter saying that she had found this when strolling in the forest, thinking of me. In her opinion, this is God's stone for me, His greeting to me. On the paper covering the stone she gave me a hint to Matthew 11:28, the Bible verse saying: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,' and commented: 'Lie down at God's heart and listen! You need this. Everyone needs this, especially in hardship.'

What is to be heard there, at God's heart? Let me quote a line from Leonard Cohen's song *Come Healing*: 'O troubled dust concealing/ An undivided love/ The heart beneath is teaching/ To the broken heart above.' Cohen tells us that the divine heart is broken, and that its mending depends on the human heart. Elliot R. Wolfson highlights that this song is 'prayer in its purest distillation,' containing insights promulgated by the kabbalists (Wolfson 2016). Human misfortune conceals an undivided love taught to the broken heart in the heavens above by the heart in the world below: 'In the celebrated teaching of Nahman of Bratslav, there is no heart as whole as a broken heart. In the chasm of this desolation, all that is left is the possibility of prayer, the possibility to pray for the possibility of prayer' (Wolfson 2016). It may be that God finds us even before we have embarked on the search for Him.

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